

Book Review

REVIEWS THROUGH A PUBLIC HEALTH LENS

Sweet Justice: Domestic Hunger and the Limits of Charity

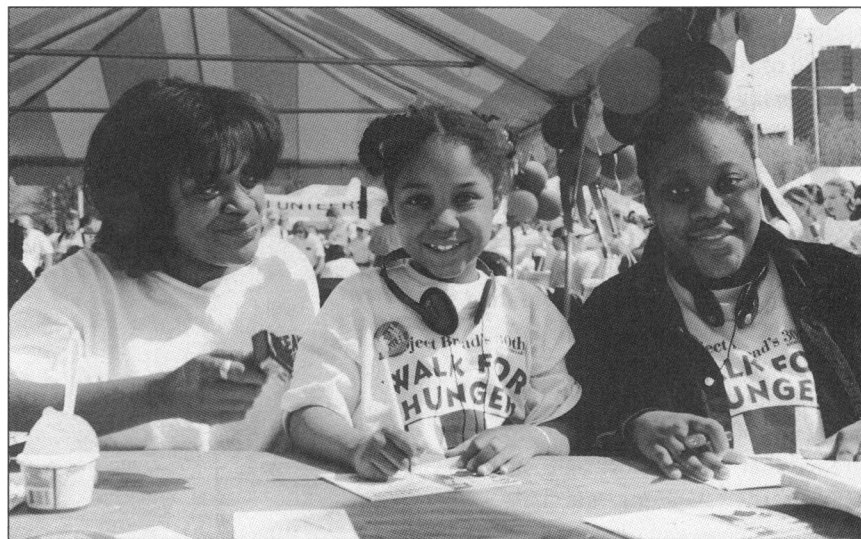
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*Sweet Charity: Emergency Food
and the End of Entitlement*

Janet Poppendieck
New York: Viking Press; 1998
\$26.95 hardcover

Sociologist Janet Poppendieck's work *Sweet Charity* is a somber and well-executed parade stopper. Poppendieck holds that the growing business of feeding the hungry through private charities in communities across the nation has corrupted public discourse, has dulled national will, and has become the excuse for political leaders not to do their jobs.

Before 1980, the business of feeding America's hungry would have brought to mind two distinct images: the bread lines of the Great Depression and noon lunches of watery soup provided in grim, inner-city shelters to a motley crowd of mostly male alcoholics and street people. Before the election of Ronald Reagan, our nation did not have an army of food banks, soup kitchens, and



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food pantries dotting the landscape of virtually every community.

Beginning around 1982, several factors converged to create hunger in the US on a massive scale; while Ronald Reagan was not their cause, the policies of his administration greatly exacerbated their consequences. The sharp recession that had begun during the Carter years produced high unemployment, high inflation, and high interest rates. Family farms went belly-up, and fundamental changes in the economy led to factory closings, relocations, and widespread unemployment, including among the households of the formerly safe managerial class. As the torrent of economic vulnerability washed down upon American families unlike at any time since the 1930s, the Reagan White House and a Democratic Congress instituted the sharpest cutbacks in safety net programs in the modern era. In the first Reagan budget, bil-

lions of dollars were cut from housing subsidies for the poor, proving to be a major factor in the consequent rise of homelessness across the nation. At the same time, over \$12 billion was cut from the federal Food Stamp and Child Nutrition Programs—cuts coming into play at the precise time that unprecedented numbers of households could not feed their children.

Enter the caring and innovative army of emergency food providers who, along with their corporate counterparts, would soon constitute a force secondary only to government in insuring that hungry people would have a source of nourishment once the last dollar of the month was gone. Almost overnight, thousands of churches and social service agency feeding programs sprang up. In New York City, more than a hundred new emergency food programs opened their doors in 1983 alone. In cities such as Houston, Pittsburgh, Los

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Angeles, and Boston the handful of soup kitchens feeding street people were quickly outnumbered by hundreds and hundreds of new facilities serving a growing clientele of formerly stable households, often with young children in tow.

Not only in cities but in towns, suburbs, and rural areas, a growing parade of volunteers responded to the growing number of victims of economic and social policy. To deliver a supply of food to these small facilities, the food bank was invented. Today, nearly 200 food banks—central depositories for industry castoffs—service more than 50,000 local programs that daily feed the nation's hungry.

So accustomed are we to the existence of "emergency food programs" that we have lost sight of their etiology, their meaning, and their consequences—not only for those they feed but for the rest of us. Indeed, many people now entering the work force have never known an America where hunger was not apparent and where feeding the hungry was not a feature of the community landscape. Over the course of several years, Poppendieck trekked across the country to talk with the people who run private food programs and those who use them. What she learned and how she interprets what she saw constitutes an insightful look into the seamy side of the much-praised business of providing private handouts to the poor.

The first thing that must be said about *Sweet Charity* is that its author never forgets, not even in the midst of her pithiest analysis, that the volunteers and professionals who staff the charitable food programs are modern-day saints. Without them, millions more people in this nation would go hungry, and for the nearly 35 million already classified by the government

as hungry and food-insecure, things would be even more tragic. Poppendieck does not dispute that the 50,000 private programs are not only necessary but represent superb commitment and highly sophisticated organizational skills. But rather than joining the feeding frenzy, she steps back to ask what else is going on here, what are the costs, and what are their consequences. Her answers are most disturbing.

Perhaps Poppendieck's gentlest critique has to do with the "seduc-

tion of charity," the social and religious motivations behind the personal involvement of many individuals who feed the hungry. Whether rewarding those who long for social contact, or simply offering quality time for the newly retired, volunteering to feed the hungry fills more than the stomach of the receiver. For some, it provides meaning to an otherwise unfulfilled life. Others are motivated by guilt—the guilt of plenty, the guilt of too much, or the guilt of having done too little. Per-



On May 2, 1999, 40,000 people took part in Project Bread's 20-mile Walk for Hunger in Boston, raising nearly \$3 million in pledges to support 350 food pantries, soup kitchens, food banks, and food salvage programs in 111 Massachusetts communities.

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haps the most troubling motivation is the narrow religious one—not of those who fulfill the commands of the major religions to aid the poor but of those who need the poor to feel good about themselves or, worse yet, as a ticket to the hereafter. It is this latter group for whom the poor are not the subjects of injustice but the objects of pity and the means of self-fulfillment. These volunteers do not dream of a society in which their beneficence is unnecessary.

But what motivates the volunteers commands little of the author's time, no doubt in recognition that what matters most is whether their efforts serve a public good. Poppendieck focuses her analysis on the "Seven Deadly 'Ins'" of the emergency food business—insufficiency, inappropriateness, inadequacy, instability, inaccessibility, inefficiency, and indignity. Her observations, not new by any means but more cogent and comprehensive than those previously offered, is that handouts are no way to feed the citizens of a wealthy, modern-day democracy. Almost by its very nature the supply of food provided by charitable programs is not enough (insufficiency); the patchwork of programs is not the way to insure adequate nourishment (inadequacy); and, no matter how many improvements are made in organization and delivery, charitable contributions are not adequate to meet the need (instability, inaccessibility, and inefficiency). Indeed, even were there a miraculous doubling of the annual supply of food delivered by Second Harvest, the national umbrella for food banks across the country, it still would be many times short of the \$27 billion cut from the federal Food Stamp Program as part of the welfare "reform" signed by President Clinton in 1996.

Clearly the most compelling "in," to which Poppendieck devotes an entire chapter, is indignity. The author reveals the fallacy of the Biblical equation of the words love and

charity by holding the mirror to those of us who are charitable: How do we feel when we receive charity? How would anyone feel about having to hold out a hand to a circle of givers? Clearly it is not the same as the reciprocal act of loving. Love binds, charity distances. Love arouses passion, charity suspends. Love personalizes, charity depersonalizes. No matter how well-meant the effort, no matter how cozy the environment, no matter how nutritious the bag of food, it is an indignity for an adult to be reduced to having to rely on others for care and security. It is the essence of dignity, of self-respect, that we feed ourselves and our families. Anything less is an indignity. Period.

Yet it's an indignity that many people must swallow and, in truth, one that today is necessary. Were the army of volunteers who feed the hungry to suddenly go home, the indignity of the hungry would be replaced by malnutrition and ill health. We all have to eat, even if at the expense of dignity, and thus the volunteers in the business must continue to feed people who are hungry. Neither the hungry nor the volunteers are the ogres in this Catch-22 situation. Neither created the current impasse wherein 20-year-old "emergency food programs" no longer operate on an emergency basis. And neither the givers nor the takers, alone, can end this dilemma.

It is at this point that Poppendieck's analysis is most penetrating. She argues that the ultimate cost of this parade of charity is the political cost. The author contends that the charitable hydra created to feed the hungry has become a major factor in the nation's inability to see, define, or solve the hunger problem. While charity feeds the poor, it also has become the basis for complacency. If the poor have food, they are no threat to the status quo. If volunteers feel they have done "something to help," they have little need to probe into the causes of hunger and the impact of charitable programs. And

political leaders point to the "limits of government" and the effectiveness of "public-private partnerships" as the excuse for not using the apparatus of public policy to protect people from hunger as is done in other wealthy industrialized nations.

For the term of his Presidency, Bill Clinton has studiously avoided addressing domestic hunger in any meaningful way. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, the nation's hunger commander-in-chief, traverses the country giving speeches on the miracle of private charities feeding the hungry and the joy of "gleaning," the Biblical practice of leaving leftovers in the field for the poor to pick up.

Poppendieck is right; the existence of this charitable enterprise has corrupted politics. It has turned public officials from justice fighters into a squad of timid pacifists. Political leaders have become cheerleaders for charity, and charity has become the public pabulum that excuses their inaction. The ultimate recipients of this "sweet charity" are not the hungry themselves but political leaders whose lack of leadership it masks. In the final analysis, private sector food programs are a sign not of success but of political failure—the failure of American policy makers to bring us into the sisterhood of modern industrialized nations that long ago adopted policies to protect their people from the scourge of hunger. ■

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